[William Dunbar]

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1 Conn. 1938-9 [Dunbar?]

William Dunbar, of Reynolds Bridge, a hale and hearty old gentleman who admits to “over eighty” but in astonishingly active is the last of the knifemakers remaining in his section. Commonly known as the “village,” this little suburb is composed of two straggling rows of houses over the mile long road intersecting the main highways from Thomaston to Waterbury and Watertown. Built expressly for the English knifemakers who once worked in the old wooden factory in the heart of the village--long since abandoned and falling into decay--the little settlement is now occupied largely by poorer families attracted by the low rents. The home of Mr. Dunbar however is comfortably furnished, equipped with modern conveniences. He spends his winters in Florida, has a summer camp at a nearby lake--and only last year, he says, built himself a small power boat which he used successfully for fishing excursions.

“This here concern,” says Mr. Dunbar (meaning the old factory at Reynolds Bridge) “was called the American Knife Company, and when it started I can't tell you. But I know it was begun by Pierpont and Morse. Squire Morse, he owned a clock shop down there on the site of the factory building, and it burned down. And afterwards he got together with Pierpont and started the knife factory.

“No, I don't think either one of them knew anything about knifemakin'. They were good businessmen. They hired the knifemakers and let 'em go, and I guess they made money. My father worked in Waterville and then came up here. No, 2 sir, he was a Yankee, he wasn't an Englishman. I learned the trade from him when I was a kid and went to work in the shop here when I was fourteen.

“And it was a good place to work too. All piece work. You could do just about as you was a mind to, and do your work whenever you wanted to as long as you got it done. Way I look at it, it was done. Way I look at it, it was an ideal system for any factory. The help had a kind of independent spirit, and they were satisfied. Why, you could take your breakfast in the shop if you wanted to.

“'twas all done by hand--the work was--pretty good prices as piece work went in those days, and you didn't have to break your neck on it to make a day's pay. You had to drill and grind, and square the blades--most of the time you were workin' on emory wheels. Old Man Pierpont had a daughter who married Dr. Ferguson and when the old man died she fell into the business and the doctor tried to run it, but he was Irish and he couldn't seem to get along with the Englishmen. They were always strikin' and one thing or another, and finally he got tired of it and sold the place to a New Jersey concern.

“Well, sir when my father went to work there, he and two other fellers were the only Yankees in the place. All the rest were English--I imagine the place employed about 75 when it was goin' full blast. Jealous of the trade? The English? Why, no. They were a happy go lucky bunch. Anyone could come in there and watch them work, they didn't give a damn.

“You could bring the work home and do it nights, if you 3 wanted to. Most of the fellers had tools and a vice in their homes. The steel was Bessemer--imported from England. I used to go down to the shop nights around Christmas time when I needed extra money and help the blade forger. I used to heat the blades and pass 'em to him and he'd turn 'em out and [seuare?] 'em--that way we'd get a lot done. Then they got so they pressed 'em out of sheet steel instead of the rod. There was a good deal of vice work and bench work---

“They used to get elephants tusks and staghorn by the load. Augustus used to bring it in an ox cart. Then elephants' tusks were bought by the pound--and sometimes the lads'd find a stone pushed down into the end of 'em. The buggers'd put 'em in there just to make

the weight a pound or two more. They used to buy ebony and partridge wood and bone, and patent stag---

“Before knifemakers came there was only four houses down here. They built twenty six houses for company employes, and every one of 'em was occupied by knifemakers. You got paid once a month, and the company took the rent out of your pay, which wasn't a bad idea. That way you didn't have to worry about it and they didn't either. Now'days your lucky if you can collect it. Rents ain't very high here now, and we get a lot of people that just stay for a while and run up a couple of months' rent and then move on. Ain't the class of people there used to be.

“Where'd the knifemakers go? Well, a lot of 'em went to work in other factories around here when the business folded up, but there was a good many who wouldn't work at anything but their trade. They moved on to other places. Some of them went up to Canastoga, New York, where there was a knife factory; some of them went up to Walden. I'm the only one left here 4 unless you count Billy Morehouse, who lives over here to Matthews'. He was a blade forger.

“They were a great bunch--a great bunch. Lot of drinkers amongst 'em. They'd walk out of the shop any time they felt like it and go down to the saloon for a drink. Maybe they'd stay an hour, maybe they'd stay all day. Maybe they'd go on a bat and wouldn't come back to work for a week.

“You could fix anything on company time, do anything you were a mind to--they'd never bother you. I've seen sleds made down there. Go up to the man on the shears and have him cut off a couple of strips for runners.

“Trick knives? Oh, that was quite a craze at one time. Everyone was trying to make them. I made a few myself.” Mr. Dunbar takes a knife out of his pocket. “Show you how mine worked--I don't know what did become of it. You'd put your finger on the bottom of the handle right here, see? And push up. That would release a pin inside and the blade would

fly open. I got a couple of things here--” Mr. Dunbar brings out a small wooden box, takes out a piece of black velvet to which is attached two miniature knives the smallest not longer than three quarters of an inch long, pearl handled, faithful replicas in every detail of the large models. “I made these,” says Mr. Dunbar. “See here, you can open 'em right up, just like any knife, if your fingernails can catch the blade. And here's a physicians' knife I made--blunt on the end so he can pound his pills with it--extry long blade. We used to take broken pieces of pearl, or ivory or whatever was left over, and make these curios out of 'em. Here's another thing--” (A woman's leg, with high-topped shoe, carved 5 in yellowed ivory, a small key inserted in one end) “Watch key,” explains Mr. Dunbar. “They used to wind watches with a key, you know, one time.”

We are interrupted by a knock at the door and Mr. Dunbar admits a young man who explains after some preliminaries, that he has come to inquire about a building lot. “See a for sale sign on it up the road,” he says.

“Yes, says Mr. Dunbar, “I'd like to sell it. Got seven acres of woodland down here I'd like to sell, too. Had a summer camp up at Bantam lake I gave away last summer. I'm gettin' too old to be hangin' on to all this property.” He turns to me. “Young feller, this may take a little time--If you got any more questions, might be better if you was to come back some other time...”